Critical Library Instruction and the Question of Labor

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Abstract

Inspired by the LOEX conference theme, "Branching Out: Growing and Adapting Your Information Literacy Practice," I reflect on my work as both a library instructor and scholar of critical library pedagogy. The emergence of critical library instruction has fundamentally reshaped library instruction, generally for the better for the students and faculty we work with. Spending so much time on what we teach, however, has led us to neglect how we teach - the material conditions in which we practice instruction. Critical library instruction, I argue, has failed until recently to adequately consider the question of librarian labor; any discussion of library instruction, I suggest, must begin with how we labor. I explore this question through recent critiques of critical library instruction, the discourse around technology, and relational teaching.

Introduction

Good morning! I am so happy to be joining you today, and look forward to learning from you later today and tomorrow. I would also like to thank the LOEX planning team for inviting me to speak and Glenda Insua and Brad Sietz for being so on top of correspondence and gentle with their nudges. This invitation was especially meaningful, as LOEX was the first national library conference I attended. Even though I don't usually get into themes, I found the conference theme of "Branching Out: Growing and Adapting Your Information Literacy Practice" inspirational, as I have been recently ruminating on how my approach to and thinking about library instruction has changed over time. The emergence of critical library instruction has fundamentally reshaped library instruction, generally for the better for the students and faculty we work with. Spending so much time on what we teach, however, has led us to neglect the material conditions in which we practice instruction. Critical library instruction, I argue, has failed until recently to adequately consider the question of librarian labor; any discussion of library instruction, I suggest, must begin with how we labor. I explore this question through recent critiques of critical library instruction, the discourse around technology, and relational teaching.

Twenty years ago, I applied to the Master's of Science in Information program at the University of Michigan's School of Information. I was, frankly, feeling a bit desperate; after finishing my undergraduate degree at Michigan, I had spent a year working as an administrative assistant to senior faculty who were absolutely mystified by the office printer, and applying to PhD programs. One, in American Studies, at the University of Minnesota, had actually accepted me - I had no clue how to apply, or what it would even be like, but I knew I liked school and was good at it. After starting, though, I realized it was not for me; while I enjoyed taking classes and writing, I found the solitary nature of research isolating and anxiety-inducing, especially during that first fellowship year. In my second year, though, I started teaching. Just discussion sections as a teaching assistant, but I liked it and it seemed like I might also be good at it. My PhD program, unlike many, also required a course in pedagogy, where I first encountered scholarship on critical pedagogy. Eager to find a different career path, and discovering that academic librarians also taught, I scheduled a slew of informational interviews with librarians at Minnesota, and sent out a single application to library school.

After being accepted, I deferred for a year while I finished my MA and taught two sections of first year writing. This confirmed for me that yes, I very much wanted to teach. The writing program at Minnesota required first year students complete some sort of research paper; naturally, I reached out to the library to request workshops for my students (yes, just a one-shot, I know), only to be told that my students could either attend generic drop-in workshops or complete also generic online modules. This was during the very early years of learning management systems, everything was pretty clunky, and these modules were deadly. Looking back now - and I'll return to this later in my talk - this probably should have tipped me off a bit more as to my newly chosen career, but I pushed ahead. I again taught first year writing my first semester of library school, but was able to work with a librarian to develop a workshop for my class, and thought, probably a bit smugly, "soon that will be me!"

At both institutions, the writing program provided intensive and ongoing training in pedagogy, including a course, weekly teaching circles, and detailed feedback from master teachers on assignments, syllabi, and classroom observations. But when I started my first librarian job, as a humanities librarian at Grand Valley State University, I felt very much like this survey respondent from Pho et al's recent article, "You Only Get One Shot: Critically Exploring and Reimagining the One-Shot Instruction Model:"

"When I first started teaching, I was given a pre-set of slides, but I don't know who made the slides. They were like, 'this is what you do.' I remember kind of hating it. I didn't have guidance or mentorship. I was just doing what I was told."[1]

Unlike them, I did have guidance and mentoring, but was also given slides. This was just kind of what we all did: a one-shot, a Powerpoint, show the library website, and search a database, probably Academic Search Premier. I was the official liaison to the area studies programs, but I primarily taught sessions for first year writing and general education classes. It was so, so far away from when I had taught first year writing, and it was absolutely disappointing. I knew that this is what I would be doing but I somehow didn't expect the subject matter to be so uninteresting to both me and the students. This was also when I was formally introduced to ACRL's Information Literacy Competency Standards, which were supposed to structure and inform my one-shots, but which were also so contrary to everything I had learned about teaching writing. One day, a call for proposals on critical library instruction came across a listserv, and I discovered that there were librarians who felt similarly about then-dominant library instruction theories and practices. Finally, these were my people.

Critical Library Instruction

For those of you who might be less familiar with this idea of critical library instruction/critical information literacy/critical library pedagogy (and just a note here: I'm using these terms somewhat interchangeably so it's not boring to listen to me, and I generally tend to think of them as covering both WHAT we teach and HOW we teach it), Drabinski and Tewell provide a nice, succinct definition:

> Critical information literacy (CIL) is a theory and practice that considers the sociopolitical dimensions of information and production of knowledge, and critiques the ways in which systems of power shape the creation, distribution, and reception of information. CIL

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[1] Annie Pho, Salma Abumeeiz, Kristina Vela Bisbee, Nisha Mody, Renee Romero, Wynn Tranfield, and Doug Worsham, "You Only Get One Shot: Critically Exploring and Reimagining the One-Shot Instruction Model," *College & Research Libraries*," 83, no. 5 (September 2022): 730, https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.5860/crl.83.5.726.

acknowledges that libraries are not and cannot be neutral actors, and embraces the potential of libraries as catalysts for social change.[2]

My first published work of LIS scholarship, a critique of the ACRL IL Standards, was published in this book, *Critical Library Instruction: Theories and Methods*, the impact of which cannot really be overstated. It popularized critical information literacy and critical library pedagogy among practitioners and scholars, ushering in a new moment within the information literacy project, and raised awareness of critical approaches to librarianship more broadly. Critical library instruction has, I have argued elsewhere,[3] more or less became the dominant approach to library instruction, as it has been institutionalized by library organizations, most notably in ACRL's revision of the Information Literacy Competency Standards which eventually became the Framework for Information Literacy. Critical librarianship encompasses all forms of library work, but much scholarship within this subfield continues to focus heavily on library instruction. Much of my own scholarship fits within critical librarianship/critical library pedagogy, as it brings library theory and practices together with the broader sociopolitical context by focusing on issues such as technology, labor, neoliberalism, and social inequities. Critical library ish, that is, is totally my happy place.

From the beginning of my time as an academic librarian to now, I have been a liaison or subject librarian with instructional duties. After a year at Grand Valley State, I moved to Georgetown University to become the new liaison to American history, American studies, and African American studies, but as a member of a fairly small library instructional staff, with very high library instruction demands, I consistently taught sessions for all kinds of courses. I mostly ditched the Powerpoints, and once I began developing relationships with specific teaching faculty, started incorporating critical approaches in my instruction sessions. Sometimes in very small ways, as I describe in my essay "Carrots in the Brownies: Incorporating Critical Librarianship in Unlikely Places,"[4] like moving away from the instructor telling me to tell students "the internet is bad" to the instructor agreeing with me saying, "Wikipedia might not be the best source if your professor requires scholarly

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[2] Emily Drabinski and Eamon Tewell, "Critical Information Literacy," *The International Encyclopedia of Media Literacy*, eds. Renee Hobbs and Paul Mihailidis (Wiley, 2019): 1-4, https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118978238.ieml0042.

[3] Maura Seale, "Critical Library Instruction, Causing Trouble, and Institutionalization," *Communications in Information Literacy* 14, no. 1 (June 1, 2020), https://doi.org/10.15760/comminfolit.2020.14.1.6.

[4] Maura Seale, "Carrots in the Brownies: Incorporating Critical Librarianship in Unlikely Places," *Critical Library Pedagogy Handbook, Volume 1*, eds. Nicole Pagowsky and Kelly McElroy (Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries, 2016): 229-232, https://mauraseale.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/mseale-carrots-in-brownies.pdf.

articles." And sometimes in big, important ways, as when I worked with history faculty members on incorporating Decoding the Disciplines (a method to narrow the gap between expert and novice thinking) and the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (research on teaching for disciplinary faculty) into both departmental learning outcomes and library instruction sessions.[5] I'm not going to get into these rather big concepts now, but I'm happy to talk more about them in the question period.

Although librarians did not have faculty status at Georgetown, I was there long enough to develop solid relationships with teaching faculty and felt supported enough by my supervisors to experiment, reflect, and revise. My instruction felt relational rather than transactional, as Pho et al. describe: "the one-shot model works best when it is the beginning of an ongoing partnership with students and faculty, who maintain that connection in various ways after the session has concluded, including following up for research consultations and project collaborations."[6] I developed these sorts of real partnerships with several teaching faculty; we worked together over multiple semesters to integrate critical library instruction into their courses, including readings and assignments, constantly revising and refining our approach based on what we heard from students. I didn't just come into their class, do my thing, and then leave, and this felt like important and valuable work. For instance, I started working with a first year student probably mid-way through my time at Georgetown; he still sends the occasional update now that he is a doctor.

But there was a constant push towards library instruction as transactional: we tallied our classes and consultations and reference questions, and were always exhorted to do more. Looking back, I was absolutely overworked - I think I did nearly 100 individual consultations one semester - as were many of my colleagues, and we were not especially valued by library or university administration (although teaching faculty and students were generally very appreciative). My focus on small interventions in my instruction sessions was not just driven by power disparities between libraries and teaching faculty, but also by the limited amount of time and effort I was able to give to each new session. At the same time, we were consistently asked to substantively engage with whatever new

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[5] Maura Seale, "Historicizing the Library: Information Literacy Instruction in the History Classroom," *The Grounded Instruction Librarian: Participating in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, eds. Melissa N. Mallon, Lauren Hays, Cara Bradley, Rhonda Huisman, and Jackie Belanger (Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries, 2019, https://mauraseale.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Chapter-7.-Historicizing-the-Library.pdf.
[6] Pho, Abumeeiz, Bisbee, Mody, Romero, Tranfield, and Worsham, "You Only Get One Shot," 734.

educational technology was trending that year or semester: video tutorials, MOOCs, 3D printing, online modules, course blogs. I haven't worked there in six years, and yet I'm sure that this year it is AI/LLMs. One year early on, we were all required to create video tutorials, often for products that offered their own, despite Georgetown being the most emphatically in-person, face-to-face space I've ever been in. All of this is to say: I was very invested in critical library instruction, but never felt fully able to engage in it due to having too much instructional (and other) work, some of which was clearly less valuable. I'm sure many of you understand this deeply.

Critiques of Critical Library Instruction

After Georgetown, I moved back to the University of Michigan, a much larger and better staffed institution, to become the subject librarian for history. The history department was welcoming, and I was soon integrated into three courses that run every year, and mostly integrated into the required undergraduate methods course. I have been able to spend more time on critical library instruction, and managed to develop a lesson plan for the methods course that more fully combines the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in History and critical information literacy (which, again, I can talk more about later). The library consistently develops and hosts internal programming focusing on critical library pedagogy, and participating is seen as part of our jobs. As the liaison for a single department, my work is so much more focused and I have so much more breathing room. I have been able to teach sessions that highlight the historicity of libraries and archives, for example, and walk students through what I call the primary source lifecycle. At the same time, critiques of critical library pedagogy have also begun to emerge - I'm thinking of pieces like Veronica Arellano Douglas's "Counternarratives in Information Literacy,"[7] Sofia Leung and J. R. López-McKnight's "Dreaming Revolutionary Futures: Critical Race's Centrality to Ending White Supremacy," several of the essays in Rose Chou and Annie Pho's *Pushing the Margins: Women of Color and Intersectionality in LIS*, e.g. Kawanna Bright's "A Woman of Color's Work Is Never Done: Intersectionality, Emotional and Invisible Labor in Reference and Information Work," Fobazi Ettarh's "Vocational Awe and

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[7] Veronica Arellano Douglas, "Counternarratives in Information Literacy," WILU Closing Plenary, *Libraries + Inquiry*, June 25, 2021, https://veronicaarellanodouglas.com/information-literacy-2/wilu-closing-plenary-session/; Fobazi Ettarh, "Vocational Awe and Librarianship: The Lies We Tell Ourselves," *In the Library with the Lead Pipe*, January 10, 2018, https://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2018/vocational-awe/; Sofia Leung and Jorge López-McKnight. "Dreaming Revolutionary Futures: Critical Race's Centrality to Ending White Supremacy." *Communications in Information Literacy* 14, no. 1 (June 1, 2020), https://doi.org/10.15760/comminfolit.2020.14.1.2; Rose L. Chou and Annie Pho, *Pushing the Margins: Women of Color and Intersectionality in LIS* (Sacramento: Library Juice Press, 2018); Kawanna Bright, "A Woman of Color's Work Is Never Done: Intersectionality, Emotional and Invisible Labor in Reference and Information Work," *Pushing the Margins: Women of Color and Intersectionality in LIS* (Sacramento: Library Juice Press, 2018): 163-195.

Librarianship: The Lies We Tell Ourselves" (which is about LIS more broadly, but still applicable) -
all of which point to assumptions critical library pedagogy makes about positionality, power, labor,
and empowerment. I too contributed to this emerging critique, arguing with my frequent
collaborators Karen P. Nicholson and Rafia Mirza:

> We suggest that critical library pedagogy's emphasis on the initiative and agency of individual
> teachers and students risks reinscribing neoliberal subjectivities of performance and merit
> and exacerbating labor issues endemic to the neoliberal university, such as doing more with
> less, understaffing, competition, and burnout, thereby working against collective action,
> solidarity, and equity.[8]

Critical library instruction appeals to us so strongly because it offers a way for us to claim agency,
even if only in our classroom. It makes us feel good, and important, and necessary because through
it, we empower students. At the same time, however, it reframes structural and systemic problems -
austerity, white supremacy, misogyny - as matters of individual librarian agency that can be overcome
with the right amount of effort. I have to say that writing this chapter was one of the most painful
writing experiences of my life, and thanks to Karen and Rafia for pushing it through, and so I have
kind of hated it since we wrote it. I actually dreaded having to read it in preparation for writing, but
wow, does this really resonate with me now due to some recent experiences. The first is,
unsurprisingly, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the second is the emergence of what I'm going to
refer to as AI but is probably more accurately described as Large Language Models or generative
"AI."

2020: It Happened
At Michigan, I liaise with a single department, but it's a big department: about 80 faculty and
probably 100 graduate students (history PhD students tend to linger). I am not the only librarian
that these students and faculty work with - I have many colleagues that specialize in area studies -
but I am officially their point person in the library. The disruption to research and teaching brought
about by the pandemic led to me teaching less often, probably because we were all scrambling and

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[8] Rafia Mirza, Karen P. Nicholson, and Maura Seale, "Acting 'As If:' Critical Pedagogy, Empowerment, and Labor," *The Critical Librarianship and Pedagogy Symposium: Reflections, Revisions, and New Works*, eds. Yvonne Mery and Anthony Sanchez (Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries, 2023): 112, https://mauraseale.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/CH6.-Acting-As-If-1.pdf.

struggling not just with work but with life. Teaching was no longer the center of my work life - I did way more consultations and reference. Remember, I decided to enter librarianship specifically because I liked teaching and felt (and was told) I was good at it. I was already doing less instruction than I had been doing at Georgetown, and hadn't really been at Michigan long enough when the pandemic began to have developed strong, deep, and consistent relationships with faculty and instructors. This displacement of instruction from my daily work felt weird and wrong, and it unsettled me. Once we were back to "normal," my instruction numbers remained low, although they have somewhat rebounded this year. I've talked with colleagues who have experienced the same, and while we can't definitely pinpoint the reasons, it doesn't seem to be due to our individual actions. Two years ago, I was also diagnosed with a chronic and unpredictable illness, and for the first time in my career as a librarian, ended up canceling several library instruction sessions, or pleading with colleagues to substitute teach at the last minute. I had been lucky (and also we treated illness a bit differently) and had only had to do this once before. Obviously, we should not be required to teach when we are sick, but my initial reaction of anxiety and guilt to being forced to cancel instruction sessions bothered me. Why did I feel so much responsibility for a one-shot? Is it truly an emergency if a class misses out on library instruction, or experiences it a week later or in an abbreviated form? Is it that much worse if students just email me their questions, or meet with me individually if they need help? Most faculty were quite understanding, and my colleagues were often able to step in. But I continued to feel guilty and anxious, and also like I couldn't ask for a substitute if I was teaching some sort of bespoke session designed with the instructor that was often more critical in nature.

I think a lot of us have been rethinking our relationship to our work and jobs in the aftermath of the pandemic, but these events have really driven home that labor must be at the center of all discussions of library instruction. Library instruction is not just what we could potentially do, or can envision ourselves doing, or what might be best for students and faculty; it is also what we are able to do. For many of us, instruction might be just one part of our job - I checked and it's officially 20% of mine, combined with reference - but you might not guess this if you were completely unfamiliar with academic librarianship and took a peek at our conferences, journals, standards, guidelines, and other forms of documentation that are meant to guide our instructional work. We are frustrated by the persistent limitations of the one-shot model, but most of our libraries do not have the staffing levels or resources to do something differently, or often even to explore other models. The institutionalization of critical library pedagogy pushes us beyond canned and generic lesson

plans based on mysteriously bequeathed Powerpoints, and into a constant cycle of reflection and revision. Our professional literature around library instruction, as Alison Hicks and Annmaree Lloyd have compellingly demonstrated, portrays librarians as incapable, ineffective, underprepared and unassertive, and the primary reason for the failure of the information literacy project.[9] To be clear: talking and thinking about our instruction in order to improve it is not a bad thing. I am not denigrating library instruction at a library conference. But it is striking to me just how much we differ from teaching faculty, many of whom do in fact reflect on and revise their teaching and adjust their syllabi every semester, and many whom…just don't seem to care. We can and should have longer term goals that focus on changing the material conditions we work within, such as increased staffing and instruction and outreach programs that rely less on individual librarian effort, but we need to more purposefully consider our labor. What does it make sense to do, what is beyond our reach given the constraints that we work within, what is a reasonable workload for library instruction. And I reject the notion that we can't actively strive to manage our instructional labor while remaining critical library instructors. This absolutely might be my burnout speaking, so I look forward to hearing from you.

AI: It Also Happened

Once we resumed "normal" life, it felt like there was a bit of a vacuum in academic library discourse, specifically around educational technology. I have my theory on why that is, but it is only a theory, which I'll explain in a moment. First: I am not anti-technology; I attended an iSchool, where the human-computer interaction program was as large as the library and information services program. I took information architecture instead of cataloging, and despite crying every week, managed to get an A in a programming course (in truth, I went to the School of Information because I could get in-state tuition). I created and for some time maintained the social media accounts for Georgetown University Library, while pursuing every form of technology training offered, only to find I didn't use most of them in my daily work. I read the Horizon Report. I also was forced to waste time creating video tutorials that were never used and watched as an entire library unit was reassigned to produce MOOCs. For thirty years, we have been told that libraries were in crisis due to the

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[9] Alison Hicks and Annemaree Lloyd, "Deconstructing Information Literacy Discourse: Peeling Back the Layers in Higher Education," *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science* 53, no. 4 (December 2021): 559–71, https://doi.org/10.1177/0961000620966027; Alison Hicks and Annemaree Lloyd, "Relegating Expertise: The Outward and Inward Positioning of Librarians in Information Literacy Education" *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science* 54, no. 3 (September 2022): 415–26, https://doi.org/10.1177/09610006211020104.

emergence of personal computing, the rise of the internet, and the cultural, political, and economic ascendancy of Silicon Valley,[10] and the solution was technology, usually some sort of educational technology (and just a brief note here: this is applicable to education writ large, not just academic libraries). And so we turn to information technology, and the values and practices of Silicon Valley to validate us and somehow prove our worth, as Rafia Mirza and I have argued.[11] My theory about the vacuum in academic library discourse is that the pandemic and the forced move to online education revealed that technology was not the solution to anything. This is not anti-online education - it obviously works for many people in many contexts - but it did demonstrate technology is not the one weird trick that will fix the social, political, and economic problems facing libraries and education.

And then along came AI, or more accurately, LLMs and generative "AI." I am not going to comment on whether or not there are actual use cases for these technologies, as I am not an expert, and I know many of you, and many of my own colleagues, are doing interesting and useful instruction around "AI"/LLMs, so I do want to point out that this isn't commentary on that.[12] The hype cycle around AI has felt absolutely unhinged, much more so than some other recent technologies like NFTs, blockchain, the metaverse (aka SecondLife round two), VR/AR - all of which, I have to note, have made their appearances in the library literature even if they were not taken up en masse. There are now somehow multiple library conferences on AI and an ARL report.[13] ACRL has created a task force to develop AI Competencies for Library Workers and is looking for volunteers.[14] Michigan has developed its own branded versions of multiple generative AI tools, and it feels like every instructional workshop this year outside of the library has been about AI

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[10] Buschman, 2003; Drabinski, 2016; Popowich, 2021 John Buschman, *Dismantling the Public Sphere: Situating and Sustaining Librarianship in the Age of the New Public Philosophy* (Westport: Libraries Unlimited, 2003); Emily Drabinski, "Valuing Professionalism: Discourse as Professional Practice," *Library Trends,* 64, no. 3 (2016): 604–614, https://doi.org/10.1353/lib.2016.0005; Sam Popowich, Editorial, *Canadian Journal of Academic Librarianship*, Special Issue on Refusing Crisis Narratives 7 (2021): 1–7, https://doi.org/10.33137/cjalrcbu.v7.37642.

[11] Rafia Mirza and Maura Seale, "Who Killed the World? White Masculinity and the Technocratic Library of the Future," *Topographies of Whiteness: Mapping Whiteness in Library and Information Science*, ed. Gina Schlesselman-Tarango (Sacramento, Library Juice Press, 2017): 171-197, http://mauraseale.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Mirza-Seale-Technocratic-Library.pdf.

[12] Molly White, "AI Isn't Useless. But Is It Worth It?," *Citation Needed*, April 17, 2024, https://www.citationneeded.news/ai-isnt-useless/.

[13] Leo S. Lo and Cynthia Hudson Vitale, Evolving AI Strategies in Libraries: Insights from Two Polls of ARL Member Representatives over Nine Months, Association of Research Libraries, March, 29, 2024, https://www.arl.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Evolving-AI-Strategies-in-Libraries.pdf.

[14] Association of College and Research Libraries, "Guidelines, Standards, and Frameworks - Listing By Topics, accessed April 28, 2024, https://www.ala.org/acrl/guidelines-standards-and-frameworks-listing-topic.

(there were eight workshops hosted by campus IT in April, all AI).[15] There have been multiple symposia about AI on campus recently as the winter semester wrapped up. The hype and the push to use AI in the classroom has been completely overwhelming at my institution. Dave Karpf, a scholar of political communication, has recently suggested that the discursive role played by "AI" is that it provides a "sense of futurity."[16] It fills that vacuum. This is what Silicon Valley actually sells, especially since it hasn't really produced a profoundly disruptive technology since the iPhone in 2007. Academic libraries, as Rafia Mirza and I argue, are overly invested in the ideas of "the future," which by definition cannot be known in advance, and in technology as the material instantiation of the future. Libraries do this in order to accrue prestige and relevance, as their core functions are characterized by gendered, invisibilized, and devalued forms of labor, namely affective, interpersonal, reproductive, and maintenance.[17] Moreover, this is yet another item in the long list of things that we have to learn about, do, and then teach students about, out of fear we will be left behind.

This is my seventeenth year as an academic librarian, and I really can't pretend to not recognize yet another technology hype cycle and get on board. Technology hype cycles are, after all, significantly implicated in librarian labor. I think about my unwatched video tutorials and the collapse of MOOCs after many institutions discovered it was kind of difficult to monetize free courses. I think about those librarians at the University of Minnesota, who pointed my students to generic online course modules that they had spent a lot of time developing (and to be clear here: I don't blame them for doing that - they undoubtedly had too much work). Every hype cycle brings something else we have to learn to use and then figure out how to teach in our already over-stuffed one-shots. If we do not, there is the very real threat that AI will be used to replace our instruction: when graduate students at Boston University went on strike, one academic dean proposed using AI to provide feedback on

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[15] University of Michigan Academic Technology, "Generative AI at U-M," accessed April 28, 2024, https://academictechnology.umich.edu/instructional-resources/generative-ai/u-m; University of Michigan Academic Technology, "TTS Instructional Support Workshops," accessed April 28 , 2024, https://academictechnology.umich.edu/get-help/training/instructional-support.

[16] Dave Karpf. "Silicon Valley Runs on Futurity," T*he Future, Now and Then*, January 6, 2024. https://davekarpf.substack.com/p/silicon-valley-runs-on-futurity.

[17] Lisa Sloniowski, "Affective Labor, Resistance, and the Academic Librarian," *Library Trends* 64, no. 4 (2016): 645-666, https://doi.org/10.1353/lib.2016.0013; Mirza and Seale, "Who Killed the World?;" Maura Seale and Rafia Mirza. "The Coin of Love and Virtue: Academic Libraries and Value in a Global Pandemic," *Canadian Journal of Academic Librarianship* 6 (2020): 1-30, https://doi.org/10.33137/cjal-rcbu.v6.34457; Roxanne Shirazi, "Reproducing the Academy: Librarians and the Question of Service in the Digital Humanities," July 15, 2014. https://roxanneshirazi.com/2014/07/15/reproducing-the-academy-librarians-and-the-question-of-service-in-the-digital-humanities/.

student work in their place.[18] Educause recently released a case study on AI at my institution, and listed multiple projects (some of which I hadn't heard about until the case study). One project involves AI student advising in the liberal arts college, one involves AI tutors in undergraduate business courses, and one is "The U-M Library is creating a natural-language book-recommendation service. U-M students will be able to ask questions such as "What are some of the best books in the library about early Netherlandish paintings?" or "What books will teach me about social epidemiology?"[19] I think you can see clearly here the implications for specific forms of library labor, more likely to be done by specific categories of people, which are gendered and devalued. Brian Merchant, a technology critic, argues

> AI is struggling to be born at an extremely convenient moment. There's a tight labor market, high employment, and companies are very eager to embrace technological tools to either replace human workers or wield as leverage against them […] That's the vision corporate America sees cast on the walls, the product of generative AI's smoke and mirrors: Artificial systems that can save them lots of money by making workers disappear.[20]

And as educational historian Audrey Watters helpfully reminds us, this is not new:

> The entire history of education technology, from the first decades of the twentieth century, has been bound up in this quest to automate education. And much of the early history of artificial intelligence too, ever since folks cleverly rebranded it from "cybernetics," was deeply intertwined with the building of various chatbots and robot tutors. So if you're out there today trying to convince people that AI in education is something brand new, you're either a liar or a fool – or maybe both.[21]

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[18] Tony Ho Tran, "Boston University Suggests Replacing Striking Grad Students With AI," *The Daily Beast*, March 28, 2024, https://www.thedailybeast.com/boston-university-suggests-replacing-striking-grad-students-with-ai.
[19] A.J. O'Connell, "How (and Why) the University of Michigan Built Its Own Closed Generative AI Tools," *EDUCAUSE Review*, February 7, 2024.
https://er.educause.edu/articles/2024/2/how-and-why-the-university-of-michigan-built-its-own-closed-generative-ai-tools.
[20] Brian Merchant, "AI Really Is Smoke and Mirrors," *Blood in the Machine*, April 22, 2024,
https://www.bloodinthemachine.com/p/ai-really-is-smoke-and-mirrors.
[21] Audrey Watters, "I Told You So," *Second Breakfast*, March 15, 2024,
https://2ndbreakfast.audreywatters.com/i-told-you-so/; Audrey Watters, Teaching Machines (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2021).

I am not sure why something that may never be accurate or precise,[22] is already breaking the internet (and search),[23] is increasing social inequalities and subverting democracy,[24] is damaging scholarly publishing and peer review,[25] and accelerating environmental degradation,[26] must be added to our daily work. AI is, as Ben Williamson expounds in 21 arguments, a public problem for education.[27] The ways in which AI is being discussed and deployed specifically - for example, through AI "tutors" or chatbots that offer assistance - undermines gendered but valuable forms of library labor, such as instruction, reference, and consultations; at the same time, we are expected to master and teach AI so that we might one day replace ourselves.[28] Library instruction cannot keep expanding forever, and it is time for us to refuse when something does not serve us, or even actively subverts us.

Although Lee Vinsel was not speaking of libraries, his point is perpetually relevant for academic libraries:

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[22] Colin Fraser, "Generative AI Is a Hammer and No One Knows What Is and Isn't a Nail," February 22, 2024, https://medium.com/@colin.fraser/generative-ai-is-a-hammer-and-no-one-knows-what-is-and-isnt-a-nail-4c7f3f0911aa; Jason Koebler, "Is Google's AI Actually Discovering 'Millions of New Materials?'" *404 Media*, April 11, 2024, https://www.404media.co/email/61cb80f0-b46f-4875-86d7-08e09d9ed884/.

[23] Erik Hoel, "A.I.-Generated Garbage Is Polluting Our Culture," *The New York Times*, March 29, 2024, https://www.nytimes.com/2024/03/29/opinion/ai-internet-x-youtube.html.; Ed Zitron, "Are We Watching The Internet Die?," *Where's Your Ed At*, March 11, 2024. https://www.wheresyoured.at/are-we-watching-the-internet-die/; Emanuel Maiberg, "Google Books Indexes AI Trash," *404 Media*, April 4, 2024, https://www.404media.co/email/f03d4cfc-84b4-4a2b-bd95-33432235c0f7/.

[24] Ted Chiang, "Will A.I. Become the New McKinsey?" *The New Yorker*, May 4, 2023. https://www.newyorker.com/science/annals-of-artificial-intelligence/will-ai-become-the-new-mckinsey; Ben Williamson, Alex Molnar, and Faith Boninger "Time for a Pause: Without Effective Public Oversight, AI in Schools Will Do More Harm Than Good," March 5, 2024, https://nepc.colorado.edu/publication/ai.

[25] Emanuel Maiberg, "The AI Peer-Review Crisis," *404 Media*, April 2, 2024, https://www.404media.co/email/c36519c0-0930-47a2-808d-48631b597dc1/; Emanuel Maiberg, "AI-Generated Science" *404 Media*, March 18, 2024 https://www.404media.co/email/a2a944f8-235a-4c75-8d00-955edbbfcb4e/; Donna Lanclos and Lawrie Phipps, "What Is, What Could Be, What Should Be," *Digital Is People*, March 19, 2024. https://digitalispeople.org/what-is-what-could-be-what-should-be/; Weixin Liang, Zachary Izzo, Yaohui Zhang, Haley Lepp, Hancheng Cao, Xuandong Zhao, Lingjiao Chen, Haotian Ye, Sheng Liu, Zhi Huang, Daniel A. McFarland, and James Y. Zou, "Monitoring AI-Modified Content at Scale: A Case Study on the Impact of ChatGPT on AI Conference Peer Reviews," *arXiv*, March 11, 2024, https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2403.07183.

[26] Steven Gonzalez Monserrate, "The Staggering Ecological Impacts of Computation and the Cloud," The MIT Press Reader, February 14, 2022, https://thereader.mitpress.mit.edu/the-staggering-ecological-impacts-of-computation-and-the-cloud/; Liza Featherstone, "The Scariest Part About Artificial Intelligence," *The New Republic*, March 5, 2024, https://newrepublic.com/article/179538/environment-artificial-intelligence-water-energy.

[27] Ben Williamson, "AI in Education Is a Public Problem," *Code Acts in Education*, February 22, 2024, https://codeactsineducation.wordpress.com/2024/02/22/ai-in-education-is-a-public-problem/.

[28] Laurie M. Bridges, Kelly McElroy, and Zach Welhouse, "Generative Artificial Intelligence: 8 Critical Questions for Libraries," *Journal of Library Administration* 64, no. 1 (January 2, 2024): 66–79, https://doi.org/10.1080/01930826.2024.2292484; *Journal of eScience Librarianship Special Issue: Responsible AI in Libraries and Archives* 13, no. 1 (2024), https://publishing.escholarship.umassmed.edu/jeslib/issue/59/info/.

We are terrible at predicting the future, and when we try to look forward into the tomorrow

of new technologies that are surrounded by a great deal of emotional energy (importantly,

not all are), our imaginations end up reproducing the hype-filled narratives that permeate us.

We can demonstrate this by looking at our fields' own histories.[29]

When I look back on my own history as an academic librarian, this is about what I see, with Watters

point that this is not novel, but has been actively rebranded and memory-holed. Academic librarians

have been performing this exact arc with every new instance of educational technology, and what it

primarily seems to lead to is ever increasing amounts of work.[30] Perhaps watching and waiting

occasionally might relieve some of the pressures on our work lives?[31] We might not be able to

change the structures that force us to pay attention to and teach new technologies, but perhaps we

could place better guardrails around our own work to minimize our efforts if it seems like it's going

to be yet another instance of SecondLife, MOOCs, or the blockchain. We need to be better about

remembering that the future isn't knowable, and that we actually have a hand in creating it.

Stuckness and Cruel Optimism

Our constant cycling through technology hype cycles, combined with our eternally conflicted and

probably overanalyzed relationship to instruction, has led me to feel incredibly stuck. In 2009, Cathy

Eisenhower and Dolsy Smith published, "The Library as 'Stuck Place': Critical Pedagogy in the

Corporate University," which I also (continually) return to.[32] They conclude that critical library

pedagogy represents a "profoundly ambivalent" and even "negligible" practice where, at best,

thinking might occur. In short, critical library instruction is a "stuck place." In a forthcoming

editorial I've written with Karen P. Nicholson, we suggest that our profession's relationship with

information literacy might be understood through literary scholar Lauren Berlant's concept of "cruel

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[29] Lee Vinsel, "How to Be a Better Reactionary: Time and Knowledge in Technology Regulation," October 17, 2023, https://sts-news.medium.com/how-to-be-a-better-reactionary-1630b5098fbc.

[30] Timothy Burke, "The Mythical People-Life," Eight by Seven, April 12, 2024, https://timothyburke.substack.com/p/the-mythical-people-life.

[31] Catherine J. Denial "Wrestling with A.I.," *Teaching and Generative AI: Pedagogical Possibilities and Productive Tensions*, eds. Beth Buyserie and Travis N. Thurston (UEN Digital Press, 2024), https://uen.pressbooks.pub/teachingandgenerativeai/chapter/wrestling-with-a-i/.

[32] Cathy Eisenhower and Dolsy Smith, "The Library as 'Stuck Place:' Critical Pedagogy in the Corporate University," *Critical Library Instruction: Theories and Methods*, eds. Maria T. Accardi, Emily Drabinski, and Alana Kumbier (Duluth: Library Juice Press, 2010): 305-317.

optimism."[33] This is when something we desire stands in the way of our flourishing, producing a sense of stuckness or impasse. That is, sometimes I think we are far too ambitious and perhaps self-aggrandizing - not that ambition or confidence are bad things, but that constraints on our work that are out of our control shape our work far more than we want, and individual agency within the library classroom isn't, and won't be enough to change them. Instead of constantly butting up against external constraints, perhaps we should think instead of enacting guardrails around our work to protect ourselves from feeling overwhelmed or burned out. I was recently revisiting the 2022 special issue of *College and Research Libraries* on the one-shot, which includes an essay by Veronica Arellano Douglas and Jo Gadsby, "The Power of Presence: One-Shots, Relational Teaching, and Instruction Librarianship." In it, they ask, ""What can make even brief encounters meaningful?" and argue for the concept of "connected teaching," which is "a way of being in our work as educators, not a checklist of activities:"

> We argue that duration of teaching interactions is less vital to Connected Teaching than quality of presence, which is a commitment to openness, mutual respect, and a willingness to change and grow through the educational interaction. When applied to the discourse around one-shot library instruction, we believe that a focus on Connected Teaching, rather than time spent teaching [...] can help us become unstuck from ineffective teaching structures, methods, and approaches. This is not an in-defense-of-the-one-shot article. Instead, it is our attempt to separate temporal pressures from the capacity of librarians to teach through and toward relationship.[34]

What I appreciate so much about this essay is how reframing library instruction in terms of connected teaching moves us away from endlessly circling around what we teach and how little time we are given to do it, to centering and prioritizing the relational work of library instruction. If we are given (and have given ourselves) the impossible task of teaching (critical) information literacy, within corporate universities that prioritize neoliberal logics of efficiency and austerity, we are bound to

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[33] Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).
[34] Veronica Arellano Douglas and Joanna Gadsby, "The Power of Presence: One-Shots, Relational Teaching, and Instruction Librarianship," *College & Research Libraries* 83, no. 5 (September 2, 2022): 807, https://doi.org/10.5860/crl.83.5.807.

fail.[35] We have a disproportionate sense of responsibility for instruction that makes it difficult to manage and set guardrails around our own labor. Understanding the library classroom, whether physical or virtual, as primarily a site for connected teaching may offer relief. Moreover, centering relationship as developed through connected teaching might mitigate our feeling that we absolutely need to take on any educational technology that appears before us. I don't claim that this is the final word, or even my final word, but I do think it's worth exploring.

I want to end by thinking on something Edward Said, the Palestinian-American literary theorist said, somewhat offhandedly, in his introduction to *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*. He describes "the American university generally being for its academic staff and many of its students the last remaining utopia."[36] I don't think Said was uncritical or unreflective about higher education, but he here is pointing out that there are perhaps some elements worth holding onto, some elements that are utopian in nature. Universities and colleges, and academic libraries, are not immune from or somehow outside of the inequalities of broader societies, but they do offer the promise of all people being able to engage in research and deep thinking, of being able to learn and understand more about the world, and of being able to better that world. Obviously, this isn't how they operate or have operated historically, but that promise is worth holding on to. Academic libraries have spent the past thirty years emulating Silicon Valley in search of validation and prestige. Given the outgoing and intensifying enshittification[37] of the technologies we have spent thirty years thirsting after, I wonder instead if academic libraries and librarians might be better served by turning instead to Said's critical sense of utopia. Library technologies are definitely not perfect, and I do in fact have many grievances, but our business model isn't built around selling ads based on user data, allowing AI-generated content to proliferate to sell more ads, or providing frequently inaccurate "answers" to questions.[38] If the internet is increasingly becoming the space in which computers talk to computers,

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[35] Baharak Yousefi, "Four Provocations for the Time Being." Critical Librarianship and Pedagogy Symposium, 2022. https://repository.arizona.edu/bitstream/handle/10150/669864/CLAPS_2022_Yousefi%20_Four_Provocations_Keyn ote.pdf.

[36] Edward W. Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000).

[37] Cory Doctorow, "The 'Enshittification' of TikTok," *Wired*, January 23, 2023,https://www.wired.com/story/tiktok-platforms-cory-doctorow/.

[38] Mia Sato, "When a Funeral Is Clickbait," *The Verge*, February 12, 2024, https://www.theverge.com/24065145/ai-obituary-spam-generative-clickbait; Katie Notopoulos, "AI Spam Is Already Starting to Ruin the Internet," *Business Insider*, January 29, 2024, https://www.businessinsider.com/ai-spam-google-ruin-internet-search-scams-chatgpt-2024-1; Mia Sato, "How Google Perfected the Web," *The Verge*, January 8, 2024, https://www.theverge.com/c/23998379/google-search-seo-algorithm-webpage-optimization; Erik Hoel, "Here Lies the Internet, Murdered by Generative AI," *The Intrinsic Perspective*, February 27, 2024,

might library classrooms become the place in which people talk to people, where we, and the students and faculty we work with, practice imagination and curiosity?[39] What if libraries invested in people by improving the conditions of their labor instead of imagining technological futures that center optimization, efficiency, extraction, and emergency?

Addendum: This talk was written in April 2024, and given on May 3, 2024. Since then, and as of this revision (done May 30, 2024 to include full citations), there have been several notable developments in "AI." This revision does not touch on those developments.

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https://www.theintrinsicperspective.com/p/here-lies-the-internet-murdered-by; Will Oremus, "Chatbots' Flaws Aren't Stopping Tech Giants from Putting Them Everywhere," *Washington Post*, April 16, 2024, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2024/04/16/chatbots-flaws-arent-stopping-tech-giants-putting-them-every where/; David Roth, "Does It Matter That AI Doesn't Work?" *Defector*, April 15, 2024. https://defector.com/does-it-matter-that-ai-doesnt-work; Jessica Nix, "AI-Powered World Health Chatbot Is Flubbing Some Answers," *Bloomberg*, April 18, 2024, https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2024-04-18/who-s-new-ai-health-chatbot-sarah-gets-many-medical-questio ns-wrong.
[39] Rose Casey, "In Defense of Imagination," *Public Books*, March 27, 2024, https://www.publicbooks.org/in-defense-of-imagination/.